The Christian Revelation

BORDEN P. BOWNE

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BORDEN P. BOWNE

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Preface

This discussion is a paper, somewhat enlarged, which I read last summer before the University of Syracuse. Its form bears some traces of its original purpose.

The paper was not written for professional unbelievers, but solely to relieve some of the difficulties under which popular religious thought labors. Of course, nothing can be, or be done, which is not subject to cavil, when a caviling spirit exists; but something may be done for earnest minds by a proper illumination of their problems.

The essential thought of the paper is, that the current difficulties concerning revelation are needless, if not gratuitous, and arise mainly from the abstract discussion of a problem which can be successfully dealt with only in the concrete. This is that fallacy of the abstract which has vitiated so much discussion of concrete matters. The only remedy lies in treating concrete matters concretely.

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I am far from thinking that the last word has been spoken in Biblical criticism; but I am sure that the practical value of the Scriptures must be determined in the way here suggested, and that the effective defense and recommendation of revelation must follow the lines laid down.

BORDEN P. BOWNE.

AUGUST, 1898.

The Christian Revelation

OUR Christian faith is, that God, at sundry times and in divers manners, spake unto the fathers by the prophets, and that, in the fullness of time, he revealed himself unto men by his Son. This faith will last as long as the Christian Church; I believe it will last as long as the human race. Nevertheless, it is possible to conceive the revelation, its mode and meaning, in such a way as to obscure the truth and seriously to embarrass faith. There is enough of this misconception in popular religious thought to warrant a brief discussion of the subject. It is not, then, a question as to the re-

ality of revelation, but solely as to the manner of conceiving it.

Of God's self-revealing movement the Bible is the historical and literary product and record. It is the literature which grew out of and around the revelation, and it mediates for us a knowledge of the revelation. But on turning to the Bible, we soon become conscious of needing some guiding principle for its interpretation. Except from the right standpoint, the Bible is a most embarrassing book. Much of it seems to have no connection with those moral and religious interests which, we suppose, give revelation its motive and value. Instead of a compact expression of doctrines to be believed and of duties to be done, we have a heterogeneous collection of history, geography, biography, genealogy, statistics, liturgy, poetry, proph-

ecy, sermons, stories, parables, letters, and such like. And when questions of conduct are touched upon, they seem to have little significance for us. Temple rites, idol worship, the tiresome purifications of the Mosaic law, the disputes between Pharisees and Sadducees, the eating of things offered to idols,—these, and similar obsolete questions, are the matters dwelt upon; and for us these questions are as dead as the men who raised them. What concern have we with prophetic burdens of Egypt, or Moab, or Tyre? And what practical wisdom do we gain from them for the guidance of our own lives? By following out this line of thought, one might easily reach the conclusion that the Bible is, for us, obsolete and worthless.

Thus we see how the Bible may be an embarrassing and in-

credible book, conceived as a Divine revelation, unless we get the right point of view. We need, then, to seek for some central idea, which shall unify and illuminate the whole, if we are to find any supreme value in it. And such an idea must be sought in a better conception of the purpose and contents of revelation. Only thus can we give these dead questions and this vanished life any abiding significance for present and future times.

What is the Christian Revelation?

To this question many answers might be given; but the one which best sums the truth, and best brings out the great and abiding value of Christian teaching, is this: The Christian revelation is essentially a revelation of God. It teaches us what God is, and what he means. It is,

primarily and fundamentally, a revelation of the righteousness and grace of God. It tells us how God feels toward us; what he has made us for; what he has done and is doing for us; how we are to think of life and its meaning, of death and destiny, of our mutual human relations also, and the spirit in which we are to live. The answer to these questions constitutes the gist of the Christian revelation; and this answer the Church forever repeats in its profession of faith in God the Father, in his Son our Savior and Lord, in the inspiring and sanctifying Spirit, in the forgiveness of sins, in the kingdom of God upon earth, and in the life everlasting. These ideas are at the heart of the Christian religion and of Christian civilization; and these ideas have come with abiding power and definiteness

and fullness into the world's thought and life only along the line of God's revelation of himself through the prophets and through his Son.

The Christian revelation, then, is not the Bible, though it is in the Bible. It consists essentially in certain ways of thinking about God, his character, his purpose in our creation, and his relation to us. It has these great ideas for its contents, and it is to be approached, studied, and understood only in connection with these ideas. They constitute its chief value for us. However the pentateuchal question might fall out, or whatever our view concerning the second Isaiah, we are Christian so long as we hold the Christian view of God and man and their mutual relations; and the only abiding significance of

the Bible lies in helping us to this view. With this view, we can dispense with everything else; and without this view, it matters little what else we have. And if the Bible helps us to this view; if this long history is an illustration and object lesson whereby we may discern what God is and what he means,—then its value and perennial significance begin to appear. And if we further find that nowhere else can the Divine character and purpose be so clearly discerned, then it is manifest that in the historic movement out of which Christianity has come, we have a revelation of God which outranks in value all others which he may have made, or which men may have feigned or imagined.

Value of the Christian Revelation

It is from this point of view that the need and value of the Christian revelation are to be determined. When we consider it as a dogmatic treatise in abstract speculative theology, or as a textbook in ethics, or as anything but a revelation of God, it is easy to doubt whether it has any special and abiding religious value. As thus conceived, the matter seems neither particularly new nor especially profitable. By carrying the abstraction far enough, we can make all religions look alike. It is also easy to pick out detached ethical precepts and deep mystical sayings from ancient life and literature, and especially from the sacred books of other religions, and thus finally to present those religions as rival-

ing Christianity itself. But the matter is very different when we consider revelation as the self-revelation of God, and when we consider its fundamental and central ideas and inspirations. Then we first begin to get some conception of its deep meaning and inestimable value; and some conception also of the world-wide difference between the Bible and all other scriptures, between Christ and all other masters. The questions men most need to have answered are questions about God, his character, his purpose in our creation, and his relation to us. We can find out from conscience and experience how to live together in the daily round; but what does life itself mean, and what is its outcome to be? With these questions the earnest thought of the world, the

religions and philosophies, have busied themselves from the beginning; and to these questions every well-instructed Christian child has a distinct and sublime answer which the sages and philosophers of the non-Christian world have sought in vain to find. And the deepest lack of that world is the lack of just those ways of thinking about God and his relation to us which we have learned from his revelation of himself. This lack is the great source of the failure of the heathen world, the source of its moral and speculative aberrations, of its hopelessness also, and of its blinding and withering superstitions. What that world most of all needs is the good news of God. This only can break the spells and disperse the illusions, because of which the people sit in darkness and the shadow of

death, being bound in affliction and iron. They do not need the Bible considered as a book. They need the Christian way of thinking about God and his purposes concerning men; and they need the Bible only as it helps them to this view.

There has been, and still is, a great deal of superficial thought in judging of revelation. Since the comparative study of religion began, many have hoped, and more have feared, that Christianity would suffer when brought face to face with the other great religious systems. Enthusiastic students have eagerly studied the sacred books of the East, and have found abundant traces that God has never left himself without a witness. And they have gathered up golden words and profound sayings from the ancient sages, without giving us any hint

of the mountains of chaff or dross in which they were hidden. In this way the impression has become quite general that those sacred books are full of ancient wisdom and religious insight, and are patterns of sound and wholesome moral teaching. In the popular mind, indeed, purely imaginative works, like "The Light of Asia," have passed for literal reproductions of those venerable faiths. In this way many hopes and fears, both equally groundless, have been raised; and prejudice has taken the place of scholarly study and criticism. Fortunately, the translation of the various sacred books of the race is changing this state of things, and is bringing the study of those ancient and outlying faiths back into that wholesome, matter-of-fact atmosphere in

which alone it can reach any valuable and permanent results. Max Müller, in the general preface to the translation of the sacred books of the East, calls attention to the extravagant fancies which have been cherished concerning the contents of these old books, and says: "Readers who have been led to believe that the Vedas of the ancient Brahmins, the Avesta of the Zoroastrians, the Tripitaka of the Buddhists, the Kings of Confucius, or the Koran of Mohammed, are books full of primeval wisdom and religious enthusiasm, or at least of sound and simple moral teaching, will be disappointed on consulting these volumes." In another passage he says: "By the side of so much that is fresh, natural, simple, beautiful, true, they contain so much that is not

only unmeaning, artificial, and silly, but even hideous and repellent."

The comparison of the Christian Scriptures with the other sacred books of the world has too often been made in a partisan interest. Sometimes those books have been rejected outright as manifest works of darkness, with the aim of exalting the Christian revelation. Sometimes, with equal unwisdom, they have been extravagantly praised as altogether comparable with our own Scriptures. But in both cases there has been oversight of the fact that the central idea in any religion is its idea of God. Hence, both parties have wasted time and strength over false issues. Christian partisans have ransacked ancient history and literature for religious superstitions and practical abomina-

tions, as specimens of what man can do without revelation. And anti-Christian partisans have done the same thing in order to gather fine sentiments with which to confound their opponents. Both parties were equally in error. Scattered ethical maxims and stray religious truths do not make a religion; we must rather judge it by its general theory of things, by its thought of God, of creation, of man, of life, of destiny, and by the inspiration which it furnishes. These things are the essence of a religion and the root of its power. Different systems might have many ethical precepts in common and many similar expressions of piety; but so long as they differ in their fundamental aims and ideas, only the utmost superficiality would think of identifying them. In a sense religious feeling can attach

itself to anything, as a fetish or totem; but a religion for developed humanity, and which develops humanity, must be a religion for the whole man. It must satisfy the intellect, the conscience, the affections, and must furnish the will with a supreme inspiration. Any religious system is imperfect in the measure in which it falls below this requirement.

Applying this standard, we see the mighty gulf between the Christian and other systems in their adaptation to human needs. The banks of the stream of time are lined with religions which have perished because they could not keep pace with intellectual development; and many of the Asiatic religions are dying before our eyes from this cause. The truth that is in them is wrapped up with so much that is puerile,

stupid, and revolting, that they are doomed to perish. They are in a worse plight in relation to conscience. They have so debased the thought of God, and have sanctioned so much of vileness, that as soon as conscience awakes, it revolts against them. They find no worthy ethical purpose in creation, but only an endless and aimless doing and undoing, weaving and unweaving, without any justifying outcome. The supreme hope which the great Indian religions hold out for man is to escape from personal existence, either by absorption or annihilation. There is no hint of a Father in heaven in the Christian sense, no hint of a divine meaning in the world, no hint of a divine deliverance wrought out by a divine Deliverer, no hint of an ever-present Spirit leading souls to right-

eousness and perfecting them in goodness, no hint of life eternal in which the faithful soul shall glorify God and enjoy him forever. To drop into darkness, and escape the woe and burden of this illusion we call our life, is their great hope for the race. The Christian view of God and the world and the meaning of life is the precise and exact contradiction of all this; and yet, because of scattered moral maxims and stray gleams of religious insight, many have been pleased to hold that Christianity has nothing new or valuable to offer. The superficiality of such a view appears as soon as we ask for the central ideas and inspirations of the religious systems. And it is to be desired that the admirers of the Asiatic religions who now and then appear among us would be at the pains to master those

ideas before beginning their work as apostles. If we would understand Hinduism, or Buddhism, or Confucianism, we must study them in their basal ideas and in the civilizations they have made. By their fruits ye shall know them.

I am in full sympathy with the desire to find the non-Christian religions as elevated as possible. I have no objection even to parliaments of religions, provided they do not hide the facts behind vague and general phrases, and provided they escape the defiling touch of the advertising harpy. There is no good reason why a Christian should not rejoice at finding traces of God's presence and inspiration everywhere among men, especially as his own Bible teaches him that there is a Light which lighteneth every man that cometh into the world.

And for both a Christian and a theist it must be clear that the great non-Christian systems have had a place in the Divine purpose for men. But this does not imply their perfection or their finality. As Judaism was the beginning and not the end, and would have been a failure if it had not merged into the broader thought of Christianity, so these other systems, at best, were only for a time. They never could make man perfect, or build him to his best estate. There is no call to blacken, and also none to whitewash. After all that charity or sympathy can truly say in their behalf, it must be admitted that their earlier forms were their best and purest, and that they have fallen below recovery. They have no power to save others or themselves. We may say, for instance, that the early Hindus set

out on their way toward God, and that their religious literature is the record of their Godward journey; but when we consider the abominations of the Hindu pantheon and of the popular Hindu religion, we must admit that somehow or other they grievously missed their way. The thwarting, paralyzing, and defiling influences of Hindu society have concentrated and incarnated themselves in the Hindu religion. After all, fruit is the final test; and Asia, past and present, is the sufficient condemnation of the Asiatic religions.

The general good nature with which the outlying religious systems are now commonly regarded, must not lead us into overlooking these facts. As we have before said, if we carry the abstraction far enough, we may make all religions seem alike. Thus, we

may discover that they all believe in God, and hence we may conclude that at bottom there is no difference. But this is only a verbal illusion, and does not remove the fact that the conception of God, and his purposes, and his relation to us, may exhibit world-wide differences in different religious systems. Again, under the influence of some vague notions of the Divine immanence, we may say that God has revealed himself in all of these systems. But unless we are willing to put all revelations on the same plane, and to deny man all influence in the unfolding of religious thought and activity, we gain nothing from this contention. Religious thinkers, who have attained to any ethical insight, would not be willing to look upon the gross immoralities and depraving abominations of many of the ethnic religions

as revelations of the Divine character and will. And when these are eliminated, we still have to admit that the revelation in the several systems is of varying degrees of adequacy and completeness. And then we have to inquire which of the various revelations brings us nearest to God, gives us the highest thought of God and man, of their mutual relations, and of the Divine purpose in the creation of man, and furnishes the highest and most effective inspiration for human living.

Put in this way, the problem solves itself. However divine we may think the extra-Christian religions, the Christian religion is diviner still. Whatever service they may have done in the ruder and cruder stages of life, they are quite unable to make man or society perfect, or build them to

their best estate. Our sincerest admirers of Buddhism or Confucianism prefer to admire afar off. They would not care to live in a community developed from and dominated by the systems in question. For it is perfectly plain that when the mental and moral nature is developed, we must make demands upon any religion which claims our allegiance which these systems can never meet. As already pointed out, a religion for developed humanity, and one capable of developing humanity, must satisfy man's entire nature—the intellect, the conscience, the affections—and must furnish the will with a supreme end and inspiration. It is, then, right that we should be well-disposed toward all non-Christian religions, and we should be glad to recognize any good that may be in them;

but this must not lead us to overlook their imperfection and practical inefficiency, and the resulting necessity of replacing them by something better.

When we compare Christianity with the outlying religions, we feel its measureless superiority. We feel it equally when we compare it with the revelation of nature. Anti-Christian speculators in Christian countries have always been accustomed to emphasize this revelation, and to claim that it gives us all the light we need. Now, that there is a revelation in nature, in the mind, in history, the wise Christian gladly admits and steadfastly maintains; but that it is so adequate and complete as to leave nothing more to be desired, is not so clear. In a Christian community, where Christian thought prevails, a philosopher may succeed in giving

bad reasons for a faith otherwise learned, and may conclude that he has deduced it for himself. But this is illusory, even for speculative truth, which lies within the possible range of the reflective faculty. Thus, the unity of God, the doctrine without which rational science would perish, has come to men mainly through the influence of Christian teaching. Philosophy has followed after, and found reasons for the doctrine; but the doctrine itself has reached the mind of the modern world chiefly through Christian teaching, which has made it a fixed tradition and possession of modern thought.

Still more doubtful is the revelation of nature with respect to the Divine character and purpose. The difficulties that meet us here are such that of late years the revelation of nature has been less

confidently appealed to, and the more earnest skeptics have scoffed at it, or have greeted it with moody and scornful laughter. A revelation of power or skill alone furnishes no basis for religion. We need, in addition, a revelation of moral character and of moral purpose. And here it is that the revelation of nature is ambiguous and incomplete. This fact was never felt so keenly as at present. The easy-going optimism of the past and the naïve anthropomorphic interpretations of the world are daily growing more difficult. The advance of knowledge has revealed so many aspects of evil and so much that we can not rationally interpret. We consider the raven and rapine of nature, the apparently meaningless aspects of things also, and the long ages in which fire and slag and

slime held barren sway. Of the lower forms of life, how few seem to have any meaning! We look at them in amazement and astonishment, and ask ourselves, How can these things be? Nor is human history much more intelligible. For the great mass of men there has been no history, but only animal need and craving, mostly unsatisfied. The many races, their alienations, their unending wars, their mutual slaughter, furnish a grim and difficult problem. And the few races which have climbed to some measure of civilization have soon grown weary of the burden as something too heavy to be borne.

When we consider the general forms of nature, organic and unorganic, and the general facts of history, we are left in great uncertainty as to their meaning. And we are no better off when

we look at the life of the individual. The general form of our life, with its marked prominence of the physical and the animal, is itself a stumbling-block. There seems to be something almost grotesque in this utter subjection of spiritual beings to animal needs. Then we note the uncertainty of our life and lot, the seeming accidents of health and fortune, the many turnings and overturnings in which we can discern no plan, the things which have impressed men with the sense of a blind fate or a blinder chance, which sports with men, and by which our best plans are often thwarted and brought to naught.

Thus in no realm does the great cosmic order seem to be working definitely at any intelligible task, least of all at any moral task. These facts are not

incompatible with the Divine wisdom and goodness. Our trouble with them may be only the shadow of our own ignorance; yet as they appear they point to neither wisdom nor goodness. Because of our thoughtless optimism we have generally ignored these facts, or we have regarded them from the standpoint of Christian teaching; and thus we have failed to get the impression of dismay which a purely logical study of the facts would furnish. This explains the pessimism which has seized upon so many earnest minds which have abandoned the Christian faith.

It is definitely settled at last that whoever has words of eternal life, science and philosophy have them not. The conceptions of God which are necessary to love and trust must be sought

elsewhere. It was a favorite thought with Lessing, and has often been repeated, that the need of revelation will pass with time, as reason will gradually penetrate to the rational ground of all religious truth, and will at last stand in its own right. But this may be doubted for a double reason: First, the basal factors of the Christian religion are not merely rational truths to be discovered by reflection; they are also, and more especially, facts to be learned by evidence. God's goodness and righteousness and his gracious purpose toward men are questions of fact to be answered by no introspection, but only by consulting his word and works. In the next place, it is very doubtful if the human mind will ever attain during its earthly existence to any satisfactory interpretation of God's methods in

the universe. Their mystery and impenetrability grow more and more marked; and the impression deepens that his ways are not as our ways, nor his thoughts as our thoughts. The problem grows faster than our knowledge; and more than ever, for faith and trust in this awful God, do we need the historic revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Here we have, not indeed a God whom we understand, but one whom we can trust while we do not understand. I do not think that Christianity removes many, if any, of the intellectual difficulties we feel in contemplating life and the world; it rather outflanks them by a revelation of God which makes it possible to trust and love him, notwithstanding the mystery of his ways, and which assures us that all good

things are safe, and are moving on and up,

"Through graves and ruins and the wrecks of things,
Borne ever Godward with increasing might."

The great significance of the Christian revelation, then, does not lie in its contribution to ethics or to speculative theology, though it has done something in both of these realms, but rather in this, that back of the mystery and uncertainty of our own lives, back of the apparent aimlessness of much history, and back of the woe and horror of much more, it reveals God, the almighty Friend and Lover of men, the Chief of burden-bearers, and the Leader of all in self-sacrifice. Over the seething chaos there broods a Spirit divine; and from everlasting to

everlasting there stretches a broad bow of promise and of light.

Such is the Christian revelation—a revelation of God, of his righteousness, his love, his gracious purpose, and his gracious work. As such it is

> "The fountain light of all our day,
> A master light of all our seeing."

It is a great spiritual force at the head of all the beneficent and inspiring forces which make for the upbuilding of men and the bringing in of the kingdom of God. If we would know some things we must turn to nature, or to history, or to psychology; but if we would know what God is, and what he means for men, we must come to the Christian revelation, especially as completed in Jesus Christ. Here only do we find the Father adequately revealed.

But we often fail duly to appreciate this revelation, or we make ourselves needless difficulties in understanding it, because of sundry misconceptions; which we now proceed to consider.

As the world is very different from what we should expect a work of perfect wisdom, power, and goodness would be, so God's revelation of himself is very different in its mode and instruments from what we should have expected. And we have commonly come to the study of the subject with various preconceived notions concerning revelation, and these have proved scarcely less disastrous in Biblical study than similar notions have proved in physical science. It is very easy, in an abstract way, to determine what revelation must be, and these abstract determinations

often make it difficult to perceive what revelation really is. And we are not willing to allow it to be what examination shows it to be; but we insist on wresting it into some conformity with our preconceived notions of what revelation must be.

The simplest and clearest notion of revelation identifies it with the Bible, and makes it the Word of God. Various reasons, historical and exegetical, unite in recommending this conception. This Word, again, was given by inspiration, and this, in turn, is most easily conceived as dictation. When the things thus dictated were written down and gathered up into a single volume, they formed the one infallible Word of God. This notion is level to the lowest understanding, and a great many Biblical phrases

readily lend themselves to it. With such a conception it was only natural to expect to find everything in the Book as perfect and complete as its Divine Author. Infallibility was a necessary consequence. To admit error of any kind was to abandon the Bible altogether. For a long time it was held that even the language was perfect; and the suggestion that the Greek of the New Testament was not classical, was resented as little less than heresy. It certainly was not to be thought of, that the Holy Spirit did not write as good Greek as mortal men.

This conception of a dictated book has always ruled popular theological thought, and for manifest reasons The notion of a revelation through history, through the moral life of a community,

through the insight of godly men, is comparatively difficult and uncertain. It is not so easy to see where and how the Divine comes in, or how to distinguish it from the human. It admits, too, of no such definite statutory formulation, and it can not be so readily used in dogmatic construction, and especially in dogmatic fulmination. A formal verbal statement, on the other hand, is something sure and steadfast. It is convenient and portable also, and when prefaced by "thus saith the Lord," it can not fail to put to flight the armies of the aliens. Nevertheless, this conception is a mistake, and a great part of our difficulties in this field are due to its implicit or explicit presence. For clearing up this matter, a word is needed concerning inspiration.

Inspiration or Dictation?

That the Scriptures are the product of inspiration is the firm faith of the Church. The authors were not left to their own devices, or to the blind gropings of their own understanding; but they spoke and wrote under the actuating influence of the Holy Spirit. So much clearly appears from a study of the writings themselves, and more especially from a comparison of them with the other sacred writings of the race. This Divine influence and guidance are more manifest to-day than ever before; for we see more clearly how difficult was the problem to be solved. While other writers lost themselves in wild cosmogonies, and fictitious science, and fantastic dreams, the writers of the Bible maintain the

most extraordinary soberness and reticence on these points. The errors into which they may have fallen are comparatively few in any case, and they in no way defeat the revelation of God at which the writers aim. The unique character of the Scriptures in this respect can be appreciated only by comparison with the other bibles of the race.

So, then, we may say that the Scriptures were inspired; that is, were written by men who were moved and enlightened by the Holy Spirit. But this does not mean that they were dictated by an Infallible Intelligence. The presence of inspiration is discernible in the product; but the meaning and measure of inspiration can not be decided by abstract reflection, but only by study of the outcome. What inspiration is must be learned from what

it does. We have no *a priori* conception of inspiration from which we can infer its essential nature. Neither are we permitted to say that inspiration always means the same thing; for inspiration may have different degrees. For instance, the degree of inspiration necessary to write the Book of Esther would be very different from that needed for the prophecies of Isaiah or the Pauline epistles. Hence we must not determine the character of the books from the inspiration, but must rather determine the nature of the inspiration from the books.

But how can there be inspiration without dictation? To this question there is no theoretical answer. The influence of one human mind upon another is a mystery; much more so is the influence of the Divine Spirit upon the human spirit.

We can only fall back here upon the analogies of our own experience. In a perfectly real sense a teacher may inspire his pupils, or a philosopher his disciples, so that they remain themselves and yet are lifted to an insight to which of themselves they would never attain. We can not tell how it is done, but the fact is familiar. In like manner, a preacher is often spoken of as inspired when he attains to some special insight or deep spiritual fervor. And the inspiration may well be real; but it does not turn the man into the passive instrument of a power above him; it rather lifts the man himself to a higher power. It is inspiration, not dictation. It is in accordance with these analogies that we must think of the inspiration of the Scriptures. God did not dictate the Scrip-

tures, he inspired them; and that in such a way that the authors were at once themselves and also attained to a higher insight than was possible to their unaided powers.

But now it will be said that this is very loose indeed. Such a conception of inspiration does well enough for vague popular speech, but it is all too uncertain for the source of revelation. This demands something more definite and objective, something which can be fixed in a scientific definition; and this must finally be found in the notion of infallible dictation.

Without doubt this notion of dictation is the only conception of inspiration which is perfectly clear; all others shade away into indefiniteness and refuse to be fixed in a hard-and-fast definition. But equally without

doubt this notion is absolutely untenable when applied to the received canon of the Old and New Testaments. Let us admit the literal truth of the passages where it is said that the word of the Lord came to prophets or apostles and which they were commanded to write down, it is still clear that this is very far from establishing the dictation of all the books of the Old and New Testaments. That some prophetic vision came to Isaiah as the word of the Lord may well be believed; but there is no connection between this fact and the claim that the Books of Chronicles or the Books of Esther and Ruth were written at the dictation of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of dictation, as held by traditional theology, applies to the whole canon; and this doctrine is groundless. The Scriptures

themselves make and warrant no such claim. Nothing would reveal the absurdity more strikingly than the attempt to conceive the Holy Spirit as the real author of the various utterances of the many speakers and writers. Speaking in their own person, they are intelligible; conceived as masks through which the Holy Spirit speaks, nothing could well be more puzzling and unprofitable. To such confusion the notion of dictation inevitably leads us; and when we lay aside this notion, there is nothing left but the vaguer yet more manageable notion of inspiration.

It may occur to us, however, that there is an important element in inspiration which has not yet been mentioned, and which is really the essential thing. This is infallibility. Dic-

tation is important only as securing infallibility; and we may give it up, provided the infallibility is retained. But if this also is abandoned, we might as well give up inspiration altogether.

Abstractly considered, this seems conclusive. A fallible guide would seem to be none, or worse than none. We must, then, consider the supposed necessity of maintaining the infallibility of the Scriptures.

Inerrancy of the Bible

If we should discuss this question abstractly, it would be easy to make out a strong case for the necessity of the doctrine. We might say that their Divine origin implies it, or that without it we should be all at sea, and might as well have no revelation. But we should be very

careful in pressing such reasoning; for, if sound, it can only result in the overthrow of all faith. It is beyond any question that we have no inerrant Scriptures at present, whether in the original languages or in the later versions. Let any one who insists on inerrancy on the basis of such abstract reasoning, come out of his closet long enough to consider the condition of the manuscripts, early and late, and the variations of the versions, ancient and modern; and unless he be given over, he will see that strict inerrancy in any Scriptures we have, or ever can have, is a fiction. If, again, he insist on historic inerrancy at least, let him suspend his insistence until he has made the Books of Chronicles and the Books of Kings tell accurately the same story.

Considerations of this kind have led many to abandon the claim of inerrancy in the existing Scriptures, and to confine it to some "original manuscript." But if inerrancy is a matter of practical importance, this position leaves us without the necessary guidance. Some original manuscript, which has vanished beyond any hope of recovery, was infallible; but the existing manuscripts and versions are not. What gain, then, do we get from the vanished infallibility? We may possibly fancy that we have saved the Divine veracity; but for practical purposes we are as badly off as ever.

And even if we had an infallible manuscript, which had descended from the earliest times, of how much use would it be to us without certain other infallibilities, which not even the dull-

est would venture to claim? If infallibility be necessary, we should need not merely to reproduce ancient words, but ancient modes of thought and feeling as well. Unless our translators did this, we should still be exposed to error. And after the ancient words had been reproduced in exact modern equivalents, they would next need to be understood. Even those who have agreed in the inerrancy of the Scriptures have had disagreement enough in their interpretation. Theology, past and present, sufficiently illustrates this fact. The nature of language itself makes it impossible that there should be any hard and fast objective interpretation. The necessarily metaphorical nature of all language applying to spiritual relations bars the way.

Thus the original infallibility

with which we started disperses and loses itself in the general uncertainties of translation and of language itself, and in the wranglings of theologians. We could hardly be worse off with any permissible admission of errancy than we actually have been with the stiffest doctrine of inerrancy. Maintainers of that doctrine ought to be put under bonds to tell us, in the face of the undeniable facts of Biblical study and theological history, what their view has done for us, or can do for us; especially now that the original manuscript is lost.

Well, then, we have no revelation; and every one is free to do as he pleases with the Scriptures! This is a "logical consequence" of admitting errancy which can not be evaded. In reply we should say that this is

a piece of closet logic, a verbal intimidation, resulting from considering the subject in an abstract and academic fashion. It is the exact parallel of a similar objection in the theory of knowledge. We may ask if our senses ever deceive us; and the answer must be, Yes. And then we may continue, with true closet logic: Well, if our senses may deceive us, how do we know that they do not always deceive us? And the answer must be that we can not tell. And then, of course, the conclusion is drawn that we have no standard for distinguishing truth from error, and that skepticism overwhelming is upon us.

Now academically this is all right. This problem admits of no abstract theoretical solution. If we stay in the closet we can argue forever, and draw the most

fearful logical consequences. But the problem solves itself in practice. We know both that the senses deceive us and that they help us to most valuable knowledge. We find out that they can thus help us, not by theorizing about them, but by using them.

The application to the case before us is manifest. The abstract problem, how an imperfect record can yet be an authority, admits of no theoretical solution. Like the problem of knowledge it must be solved in practice. The value of the Bible must be determined, not by abstract theories of what it must be, but rather by study of what it proves itself to be in the religious life of the world. And tested in this way, nothing is clearer than its supreme significance. Whatever spots we find on it, it still remains the sun.

And thus it appears how barren and practically irrelevant is the abstract question as to the inerrancy of the Bible. As already said, if the doctrine is important we are in a bad way, because we have no inerrant Bible at present. If we grant the doctrine, we can make nothing of it; and we are as badly off with it as without it. But these manifest and palpable facts are hidden from us through the deceit of closet discussion, whereby we attempt to decide what must be, instead of inquiring what is. The doctrine is really of no practical interest. It owes its supposed importance to an abstract and academic treatment, which overlooks the concrete facts of the case and confuses itself with drawing fictitious "logical consequences." We meet all such difficulties by coming out of the

closet and looking at the concrete facts. And then many a thing which may be difficult in theory is found perfectly simple in practice. Plato expounded the abstract impossibility of motion; and Diogenes refuted him by walking up and down before him. Concrete matters must be concretely tested; and abstract objections may often be removed by walking.

The Bible and Revelation

These misconceptions of the Bible, and the abstract and academic discussions thence resulting, have greatly tended to obscure the meaning and to hinder the acceptance of the Divine revelation. We have supposed ourselves bound to maintain the infallibility of the Bible, to find a revelation in every detail, and to defend the divineness of all

that is attributed to God. In truth, the revelation consists in what we have learned concerning God, his character, and his purposes; and the revelation is mainly made by a great historical movement. Of this movement, the Bible is at once the product and the historical and literary record. The truth of the revelation depends on the general truth of the history, and not at all on the infallibility of the record. But we identify the record and the revelation, and make ourselves additional difficulties by a hard-and-fast theory of our own invention concerning the inspiration of the record. In this way we have lost all sense of perspective and of relative values, and often have missed the good news of God altogether in disputes about dates, authorship, and swarms of insignificant details;

so that we can not see the great Christian facts from being taken up with the question whether Moses wrote the account of his own death, or whether the dead man really did come to life when his corpse touched the bones of the Prophet Elisha, or whether the lost ax really did swim when the prophet threw a stick into the water. And when we discuss the evidences of revelation we proceed in an abstract and ineffective way. We begin with a scholastic discussion of miracles and prophecy, and seek to establish the truth of revelation by these abstract considerations.

Now, this is inverted in every way, and we need to bring forth fruits meet for repentance. We must see that the revelation consists essentially in the new ideas concerning God and his will for men, and that all else—the his-

tory and the writing—are but means of setting forth and preserving these ideas. The Church was Christian long before it had the Bible, as the Christian ideas long preceded the completion of the Biblical canon. The Church is Christian because of the effective presence of these ideas, not because of its doctrine of Scripture. And we must also see that any fruitful and convincing discussion of revelation for us must proceed from its fundamental ideas, and from its actual presence and power in the world. Miracle and prophecy can never furnish a satisfactory starting-point nowadays for such a discussion. If Christianity were not a world-power, a great spiritual force here and now, its origin would be a matter of profound indifference, and nothing that happened thousands of years ago

would ever make it credible to us. But when we find it to be such a power; when we trace its progress, like a mighty gulf-stream, through the ocean of human history; when we compare its literature with that of other religious systems,—then we have a great historical and psychological problem for solution, and we find no adequate solution except in the insight that God has been revealing himself and establishing a divine kingdom in the earth. The present fact accords with the ancient history, and the ancient history throws light upon the present fact. It is their harmony and reciprocal implication, and the moral and spiritual grandeur of the emerging system, upon which our conviction finally rests. In this large way the doctrine of Scripture and the evidences of Christianity must be discussed,

if any valuable result is to be reached. We must pass from abstract and scholastic discussions of a book to the concrete discussion of the Christian history and outcome.

Into such a discussion the question of Biblical inerrancy need not enter at all. We need only consider the general truthfulness of the record. Moreover, the movement is to be studied as a whole; not only in its crude beginnings, but also in its outcome. The significance of the early stages of the revealing movement is not to be discerned by any abstract study of them or of their supernatural attendants, but rather by what has historically come out of them. Taken by themselves, they are crude enough. Taken abstractly, they are easily made to seem absurd. Taken without reference to what

has grown out of them, they appear worthless. But taken historically, and in connection with the system of which they are a part, they are seen in their deep significance.

There is a good deal of logical delusion at this point on the part of both radicals and conservatives. On the one hand, we often fancy that the inerrancy of the Bible is the great affirmation of Christianity; and, on the other, we fancy that if we show errors of any kind, we have overthrown Christianity. In both cases we blunder. Christianity does not affirm an infallible Bible, but a self-revealing God. It holds that God was in the historical movement out of which the Bible came, and in it in such a way that out of it we have won a supremely valuable knowledge of God. Whatever else was or was

not there, God was there, guiding the movement for his own self-revelation. This is the true and only Christian faith in this matter. And this faith is not affected by the discovery of error and legend in the Scriptures. If we admit their existence, we also have to admit that the great, fruitful, living, and life-giving ideas concerning God and his purposes have come to us along this historical line. The spots on the sun have not hindered its shining. However we insist on the presence of mythical and unhistorical matter in the Bible, it has not prevented God's highest revelation of himself. This is the treasure which the vessel of Scripture, however earthen, demonstrably contains. What the Christian thinker should maintain is, the Divine presence and guidance in the revealing move-

ment as a whole. He need not concern himself about details, whether for better or for worse. All we can insist upon is, that the error, the legend, the myth, if there be such, shall not obscure the purpose of the whole—the revelation of God. And the objector also, if he wishes to say anything to the purpose, should fix his attention on the central ideas, and not on details. The idea of an historical movement for the self-revelation of God is the great supernatural factor in the case, and this is not disposed of by any criticism of particulars.

By thus separating the revealed system of ideas from questions of date, authorship, and details of textual record, we may remain Christians, and also escape the doubt revealed in the following

editorial utterance on the polychrome edition of the Bible:

"The examples of polychrome work exhibited thus far do not inspire high hopes. To see on one page of the book we have been accustomed to call the Bible, print in five, eight, ten, and sometimes fourteen different colors, is bewildering. To turn page after page, and behold these iridescent and curiously-intermingled shades of the rainbow, is to have an overpowering sense of the inextricable confusion of the text as deciphered by the critics. If we may judge the effect on the minds of non-professional Bible readers by its effect on our own mind, we are warranted in saying that the polychrome edition will not increase either the better knowledge of the Book or reverence for it among the people."

Certainly this result will follow if we go on teaching that the Bible was infallibly dictated, or that the several works were written down once for all by the men

whose names they bear, and were never revised afterwards. Otherwise there seems to be no reason for distress or apprehension, and the Bible is no less profitable as revelation of God than before. Only now, instead of a simple dictation or single composition, we have an historical process, and the complex religious thought and consciousness of the ancient Church.

But now it will be asked again, How can a book containing error be trusted at all? This is that academic difficulty which arises from a closet discussion of the subject. We have already referred to it in treating of the infallibility of the Bible. We recur to it again in the hope that we may now be better able to discern its purely verbal and scholastic character. The same question may be asked concerning the

use of our faculties, or our trust in any evidence or testimony. All of these things are affected with fallibility, and if we should attempt to find an abstract standard which should warrant our trust in our faculties or in one another, we should only land ourselves in universal skepticism. But when, instead of theorizing about our faculties, we use them, we get on very comfortably. The problem which is insoluble in theory, solves itself in practice.

In fact, the general problem of the criterion of knowledge, in whatever field, is practical rather than speculative. Academic discussion is futile and barren. In both religion and philosophy there has been a deal of abstract theorizing about the ultimate standard of truth or authority, as if there were some simple standard which, by external ap-

plication, would reveal the truth. But there is no such standard. The mind itself, alert and critical, and with all its furniture of experienced life, is the only standard, and this can never be brought into any single and compendious expression. The mind has no standard of certainty, but it is certain about various things. Practical certainty is all we can hope for in concrete matters; and this is born, not of closet speculation, but of actual contact with reality. Concerning this certainty we can always raise formal doubts and cavils; but they disappear in practice. And any one who will use the Scriptures in this practical way, and with the aim of learning how to think about God, and his relations to us and his purposes concerning us, will have no difficulty in discerning their great religious value,

however much of mythical and unhistorical matter they may be thought to contain.

This insight into the practical nature of certainty is becoming very general in the speculative world, and marks a very important step forward. The professional skeptic finds his occupation going, if not gone; for his objections have commonly been of the abstract, academic type, and these are now seen in their perennial barrenness and fatuity. It will be a great gain when the same insight becomes general in the religious world. The search for this abstract, infallible standard, and the claim to possess it, have caused, and still cause, no little confusion. That there is no such thing is manifest, and that it would harm rather than help, if we had it, is equally clear. A standard which left no room

for choice, for love and loyalty, would defeat the moral ends of life. The heart and will have nothing to do with the acceptance of the multiplication-table, and no spiritual truth would have any value which could be thus accepted. Finally, the desire for an absolute standard and authority sometimes rests upon the fancy that there is something which we must believe or do in order to secure salvation. Of course, in that case, we should be concerned to know that we had fulfilled the requirement. But such a notion is non-existent for one who has reached a spiritual conception of Christianity.

Natural and Supernatural

This antithesis has played a great part in the traditional discussion of revelation, and has

been the source of much confusion. The traditionalist has commonly charged those who differ from him with denying the supernatural, and with attempting a purely naturalistic interpretation of the Bible. With him a variety of schemes pass for "bald naturalism." It is well to clear up our thought on this subject.

Without doubt there has been a deal of naturalism at one time and another which was "bald," and even worse. Such is the naturalism which assumes that there is a blind and impersonal system, called Nature, which does a great variety of unintended things on its own account, so that they represent no Divine thought or purpose, but are simply by-products of the natural mechanism. In this sense the natural excludes purpose and intelligence altogether, and war-

rants the dislike and fear with which popular religious thought regards it.

This conception of the natural grows up spontaneously in the field of sense thought which has not been duly chastened by criticism; but it is really an idol of the sense tribe. Philosophical criticism is rapidly leading to the insight that this nature is only a fiction of unenlightened thought. A painted devil may give one a turn, if supposed to be real; but it becomes harmless when seen in its true nature. Critical thought will not hear of an independent or self-running nature in any case. It follows, then, that whatever nature does, represents that which it has been determined to do by a power beyond it. And if that power be intelligent, as the theist believes, then nature is simply doing that

which God wills. Thus nature becomes simply the expression of the Divine thought; and all the details of nature's working are as rooted in the Divine purpose as they would be if executed by immediate fiat. And a still deeper metaphysics makes it doubtful if nature have any proper energy whatever in itself, or be anything more than the system of phenomena whose cause must be sought beyond itself. On this view there are two distinct questions concerning what we call nature. The first concerns the phenomena themselves, their nature, laws, and interrelations in general. The second concerns the causality in which this system is founded, or from which it proceeds. The first question can be answered only by inductive science; the second belongs to metaphysics.

Theism is the only answer to the second question. In God all that we mean by nature lives and moves and has its being. The independent, self-administering nature vanishes; and all that remains of nature is the phenomenal order, and this has its efficient ground in God. But this order is an important object of study. After we have decided that the world is God's work, we have still to learn what the world is, and how God works in it; what the laws are according to which he proceeds, and how events are connected in space and time. Without some knowl- of this kind, the world would be impenetrable to our intelligence; indeed we could not live at all. On this view, nature is only a general name for the system of phenomena; and events are natural in the form and circum-

stances of their occurrence, but supernatural in their causality. The events which arise in accordance with the established laws of the system are natural; but the causality is supernatural throughout. The most familiar fact is as supernatural in its causation as any miracle would be. The difference would lie only in the phenomenal relations.

Thus in the general field of theism we are compelled to distinguish the question of causality from the question of method; and we see that neither question answers the other. It is only through mental confusion that we can fancy that the decision as to causality decides the method of procedure, or that the discovery of method reveals the essential causality. Something of the same distinction may be made in

our study of revelation. Our conviction that God is immanent in the revealing movement does not decide the form of the movement; and we are left free to inquire as to this form, and to see to what extent we can trace in it the familiar laws of history and of the human mind. We are all the more free to do this from the fact that the Scripture writers largely described the facts from their conception of the Divine causality rather than from the phenomenal standpoint. It was their habit to refer events directly to God without mention of secondary or intermediate causes or natural laws. In this they were quite right as to the causality, but we get a wrong impression as to the appearance of the event. There was certainly no such phenomenal departure from the familiar order

of law in every case as the language of the reporters would lead us, with our different habit of thought, to expect. If an Armada had sailed from Tyre for a descent on the coast of Palestine and had been dispersed and sunk in a storm, a Jewish patriot would have ascribed the result directly to God, and in this he might have been right; but if we had been there we should have seen only a storm. This would not indeed disprove the Divine agency, but it would modify our conception of its form and method. The causality would be supernatural, but the method would be natural.

Without doubt this is the case with much of the supernatural reported in the Scriptures. It is to be understood from the standpoint of causality and purpose rather than from the standpoint

of phenomena. And this is said, not from any aversion to miracle, but as being the conclusion to which a study of the reports themselves and of the habits of thought of the reporters naturally leads. And when we come to the distinctly miraculous, to that which breaks with the natural order and reveals the presence of a supernatural power, we may still look for some of the familiar natural continuities. Miracles which break with all law would be nothing intelligible. We can understand them as signs whereby sense-bound minds are made aware of a Divine power and purpose which they would otherwise miss in their subjection to the mechanical movement of nature; but we can not suppose them wrought at random and without any reference to the antecedents and environment.

Thus, if we suppose God should design to make a revelation of higher mathematical truth, even by way of miracle, it is clear that the miracle would not be wrought among the Patagonians or Hottentots, but rather there where the development of civilization and of mathematical knowledge had made a place for the reception of the revelation. Even seed divinely sown needs a prepared soil, if there is to be any worthy fruitage; and thorny and stony ground do not furnish such a soil.

Hence if we admit, not only the supernatural, but also the miraculous element in revelation, it is plain that the revealing movement admits of being studied from the natural standpoint; that is, we may seek to trace the familiar laws of life and thought and history and human develop-

ment in the progress and unfolding of the movement. And such study, when thought is clear, has no tendency to cast doubt on the supernatural source of the movement. On the other hand, it lends an absorbing human and rational interest to the problem, which is impossible when the human is paralyzed by the divine, and the natural is replaced by unintelligible arbitrariness. Naturalism, then, which displaces God and erects impersonal law into a mechanical and self-administering system which knows neither itself nor its products, we cast out with assured conviction, and that on the authority of both religion and philosophy; but naturalism, which attempts to trace the continuity of law and rational connection through all the works of God,

whether in nature or revelation, is to be approved and welcomed.

Such naturalism never gives a causal explanation, but it is good as far as it goes. Its nature and value may be seen from the following illustration: It is very common to say that a man is explained by his time and environment. For instance, Newton would have been impossible among the Bushmen. His work demanded the existence of civilization and the work of previous mathematicians. This is undoubted; and in this sense, Newton is explained by his time and environment. But it would be highly superficial to rest in this. The time and environment were the same for every mathematician in England; but they were ineffective until combined with the special genius of Newton; and

this is something which time and environment never account for. Hence, in studying a man's life, we certainly need to consider his antecedents and surroundings. But the man himself is a factor apart; connected with these things, but not to be confounded with them or deduced from them. In the same way the naturalistic study of revelation can show important preparations, historical continuities, psychological uniformities, rational harmonies; but we reach nothing final until we come to the immanent, self-revealing God.

Literature or Dogma

The difficulties just dealt with have a logical and metaphysical root. We now come to others of a literary and linguistic character.

Another great hindrance to the understanding of revelation has

been a misconception of the way in which language is used. The language of the Bible has been taken in a hard-and-fast logical sense, as if it were evidence in a court of law, or a theorem in geometry, and the most grotesque distortions have resulted in consequence.

We are gradually learning that there is a language of poetry, of conscience, of emotion, of aspiration, of religion, as well as a language of the logical understanding. And the former language is absurd and incredible when tested by the canons of the latter. Such language can be understood only on its own plane and by the life which generates it. The difference might be illustrated by our speech concerning the national flag. One viewing the flag as a symbol of the Nation—its life, its history, its aspira-

tions—might say a great many things about it which would be perfectly true from the standpoint of sentiment and patriotic devotion, and perfectly absurd from the standpoint of sense. For sense, the flag is simply a variously-colored textile fabric; but "Old Glory" is more than a textile fabric, though it needs life and imagination to see it.

Now, this distinction, so important in the living use of language and so prominent in religious speech, has been lamentably ignored in the study of the Scriptures. A mathematician once read "Paradise Lost," and reported that he did not see that it proved anything. The Scriptures have been studied in much the same spirit. The tendency has been to interpret every statement as a statutory dogma, often without any reference to the con-

text, or the mode of thought of the time, or the writer's purpose. Of course, we are all familiar with the numberless petty sects based on such Philistine interpretation, but the blunder has never been lacking in the great orthodox bodies. The result is as absurd as would be produced by a similar interpretation of our language about the national flag.

As an illustration, consider the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. Every one, of any moral development whatever, is ready to renounce all claims to merit before God on the ground of his own good works, and to affirm that, if he have any place in the Divine favor, it must be based on the undeserved and condescending grace of God. Equally plain is it that, if we are to be lifted out of our low life into the life and

fellowship of the Spirit, it must be, not by any mechanical performance of external rites, but by faith and trust in the grace which is above us, and in the ideal which that grace reveals. However we stumble or fall, we must believe in that, and ever struggle toward it. There is no deeper or more vital truth in the moral and religious life. But it must be understood from the side of life. It must be vitally, ethically, spiritually apprehended. And when this is not done, and this doctrine is turned into a scheme of salvation on the model of criminal law, it loses its life-giving character altogether, and becomes incredible and pernicious. Mechanical interpretations of the atonement have often lent themselve to immoral conclusions, and nothing but a whole-

some moral instinct has prevented it in every case.

A history of interpretation and of interpretations would be highly instructive. From this mechanical way of dealing with the subject it has often happened that those most familiar with the text have made the most blunders as to the meaning. Out of this confusion we are gradually emerging, by the discovery that the Bible is not merely, nor mainly, a book of dogmas, but a body of religious literature also, which must be interpreted by universal literary methods.

A further specification of the same error about language is in overlooking the metaphorical nature of all language respecting invisible things. We have no way of expressing moral and spiritual truth except through

some figure borrowed from our physical life and experience. But in such cases, thought must be on its guard against taking the metaphor for the thing, or an exegesis of the metaphor for an exegesis of the thing. From oversight here a large part of traditional theology has been little more than an exegesis of misunderstood metaphors. The warning which Jesus gave, and which indeed lies on the surface, that the letter killeth, and the spirit only profiteth and giveth life, has been ignored, and history has been deluged with confusion and strife and bloodshed in consequence. It would lead to a great clarification of Christian thought if there were a general attempt to reduce the metaphors of Christian speech to their net significance. We should continue to use them thereafter, for

there is nothing else to use; but we should be freed from bondage to them, and it might also turn out that there is a choice in metaphors. A great many metaphors of ancient religious speech are unimpressive or distasteful to us because the customs on which they rested have passed away, and we need new metaphors for the best expression of our thought.

There are a few persons who say that they take the Bible just as it reads; but that only means that they take their interpretation for the Bible. It reads: "He rode upon a cherub, and did fly; yea, he did fly upon the wings of the wind." It reads: "He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust." Now, there is probably no one who fancies such passages are to be taken as they

read. Any one can see that such language must be taken for its meaning, and not for what it says; but not every one sees that a great many other readings are in the same case. Not every one sees that, as soon as we leave the plane of the senses, every statement has its element of "wings" and "feathers." There is no such thing as a hard-and-fast interpretation of such language. What we find in it will depend very much on ourselves, and on the presuppositions which we bring with us. And in general, the progress of theology has consisted in adjusting *readings* to those fundamental principles of good sense and good morals to which revelation must conform, if it is to be of any value for us. These adjustments have commonly been resisted by the cry that the Word of God was being

made of no effect; but Christian thought will always insist on interpreting the letter of the Bible in accordance with God's spiritual revelation of himself, both in the Bible and in the spiritual life of his children. An indefinite amount of historical theology, for which many texts could be adduced, has drifted away forever; not because we have become better grammarians and exegetes, but because it rested on an obsolete way of thinking about God and the Bible. In this way the Spirit leads us into truth. The realization of the spiritual life gives law to the exegesis of the Book.

And if any one should think that this must tend to fatal looseness, he may steady himself in two ways: First, he should remember that the value of the Scriptures can be determined

only by using them in the earnest desire to know the mind and will of God. The frightful logical consequences which may be deduced from this view, as already pointed out, result entirely from viewing the matter academically and abstractly; and similar conclusions can be drawn from any theory of knowledge whatever. But certainty is a practical problem, and is to be reached only in practice and in contact with reality. When the Scriptures are used in this way, they have always vindicated themselves, and they always will. The only persons who will experience any sense of loss in this view are the dealers in proof-texts and detailed information concerning the Divine plans and government. The detailed dogmatic constructions of the past are no longer possible, and we

have to confine ourselves to the more general insight into what God is and what he means, and to the effort on our part to realize the Divine kingdom upon earth. For this, we have all the information and inspiration needed; and this is enough.

And the second steadying consideration is found in a look into history. There has hardly been a step of progress—social, scientific, economic, religious—which has not been resisted as fatal to the claims of the Bible. Texts have been arrayed against astronomy, geology, political economy, philosophy, geography, religious toleration, anti-slavery, mercy to decrepit old women called witches, anatomy, medicine, vaccination, anæsthetics, fanning-mills, lightning-rods, life-insurance, women speaking in Church and going to the General

Conference. All of these, and particularly the last, have been declared, solemnly and with much emotion, to make the Word of God of none effect. But all of us have got beyond most of these things, and most of us have got beyond all of them. And we count ourselves Christians still. For us the Word of God is not the text of the Bible, but that revelation of what God is and what he means, which he has made to us through the prophets and through his Son. The faith in this revelation has survived across many changes of view concerning the Bible itself, and may survive many more.

Revelation as Progressive

Difficulty in understanding revelation often arises because of the failure to note its historical and progressive character. Being a

revelation of deed as well as of word, it necessarily took on an historical form; and being a revelation to immature men, it was adapted to their immaturity and shared in their imperfection. Jesus declares that God allowed some things which were not good, because of the hardness of the people's heart. Paul speaks of the old ritual as beggarly beginnings, and Peter calls it an intolerable yoke. But it was fitted to the times of ignorance at which God had to wink. The morality was imperfect, as indeed it must be so long as men are imperfect. In the abnormal relations of imperfect and willful men, the thing to be done must always be unideal, and can only be a choice between evils. But we forget all this, and look for the insight at the beginning which came only at the end. For us,

Christ completes the revelation and is the only standard.

A specification of the same objection is the difficulty felt with the character of the Old Testament saints, who, it is thought, were altogether unworthy of Divine notice, and especially of Divine approbation. Now, there is no doubt that many of these ancient worthies do make a sorry show when judged by the Christian standard, and that if God were a Pharisee and careful of his reputation with other Pharisees, he would have nothing to do with them. But as God was revealing himself as a God of grace, it seems to be quite in the order of things that he should condescend to sinners. Indeed, there was no other class to deal with, as there is no other class still. The ancient saints were earthly enough, and so are the

modern saints. That God receiveth sinners is the essence of the gospel. The fact that he bore with the imperfect saints of ancient times, is our great encouragement to hope that he will bear with the imperfect saints of to-day.

A great deal of mistaken criticism has been visited upon Old Testament morality from misunderstanding of this matter. Certainly, many of the savageries reported are very far from ideal; and the reporters may often have idealized their origin. But in any case, so long as men are imperfect, their actual code, even if directly imposed by God himself, must share in their imperfection. God might conceivably have made men over all at once by fiat; but in that case it would have been a magical rather than a moral revelation. If he is to

develop men into righteousness, he must regard the laws and limitations of humanity. God is in all history, ancient and modern; and if the modern were written from the Divine standpoint, we should find as doubtful instruments and as unideal methods as we find in the ancient. As long as the hardness of the people's heart remains, there will be corresponding imperfection in the code. If God is in history at all, we must say that he wills both that a great many things bad in themselves shall be, and that they shall be done away with. And as for the saints, even the modern saint commonly looks better at a distance than on close inspection. The perfect has nowhere come. The forgiveness of sins is still an important part of the gospel.

But if God be a God of grace, and if this revelation be so val-

uable, why was it limited to so few and not rather conferred at once upon the many? This limitation has its mystery, but it is of a piece with the Divine method in general. Mediation is the great form of Divine communication. New truth is not painted on the sky or given to all at once, but it begins in the thought of one or of a few, and thence spreads. This is the form in which God's revelation of himself is spread abroad. The source of our trouble with this method is a back-lying misconception. It is supposed that God is made good by his revelation, and that he is not gracious toward those to whom the good news has not come. This notion has indeed been held, but it is rapidly passing into the class of extinct blasphemies. God is not made good by the revelation;

he is shown to be good; and the goodness and grace exist and determine the divine action whether revealed or not. The God who is dealing with the human race, in all its branches and individuals, is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of whom every fatherhood in heaven and in earth is named. We have got as far beyond the wholesale damnation of the heathen as we have beyond the damnation of infants, whether unbaptized or not.

The revelation of God, I said, was completed in Christ. This is true only of the objective manisfestation. The revelation of that revelation is still going on. Christ's words were a leaven, a seed; and their meaning and transforming influence were only slowly to be manifested in the growing life and insight of his

disciples under the tuition of the Holy Spirit. In the deepest sense, truth is revealed only when it is understood; and in this sense the revelation is still going on. This revelation can never be put into a book, so that any one who can read may discern it; it is possible only to and in the prepared heart. Hence the spiritual meaning of Christianity only slowly enters the minds of men. The truth is hidden by blindness, or is warped into some image of our narrowness, until the inner illumination is reached. Then new truth breaks forth out of the Word. The Lord looketh at the heart. God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. These words have been with us for ages; and yet how slowly do we

free ourselves from the notion that God is a stickler for etiquette, that certain rites and formulas are necessary to secure his favor, and that only certain persons can effectually administer or pronounce them—a notion which intellectually and morally is on the level of sorcery and incantation.

But there has been a very great and wholesome growth in Christian thought in recent years. Under the guidance of the promised Spirit, we are coming nearer to the truth of God. The elaborate constructions and interpretations of earlier creeds are falling away; but in their place we have something infinitely better, a clearer apprehension of that Fatherhood of which every fatherhood in heaven and earth is named; of God's moral

purpose in the world; of his upbuilding kingdom, and his nearness to every faithful soul. The mechanical and artificial conception of salvation also is falling away; and we are coming to see that the end of the law is love; that is, the purpose of the law is to beget love in the heart and life. Or again, more concretely and comprehensively, Christ is the end of the law; that is, the fundamental aim is to reproduce Christ in the disciple. And this insight is gradually transforming Christian thought from an incredible mechanism of words and rites to a living and life-giving conception of what God is and what he means.

The mental life tends to equilibrium. The customary is clear and right; and clear and right

often because customary. With the passive mind any departure from the customary is wrong and disastrous. The most beneficent modifications of opinion and custom have been viewed with alarm. In like manner the religious life adjusts itself to current customs and conceptions; and any departure from them is thought to be fatal. But experience shows that life can abide across many changes of conception, and even that the new conception may be more favorable to life than the old. And this is true of the newer views of the Bible and revelation. We have no longer a dictated and infallible book, but we have the record of the self-revelation of God in history and in the thought and feeling of holy men. With this change the intellectual scandals and incred-

ibilities which infest the former view have vanished; and in its place has come a blessed and growing insight into what God is and what he means, which is our great and chief source of hope and inspiration.

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